

Making Friends with Your Bible

By Fr. Daniel Findikyan

The Bible is the basic source of our Orthodox Christian faith. You cannot be a Christian, much less an Orthodox Christian without reading the Bible. The following ten steps will help you to develop a daily discipline of Bible reading so that you may come to know the Bible and your faith.

1. **Establish a fixed time for Bible reading each day.** In our busy lives, one will never find a "convenient" time to read the Bible. You need to make it a priority by deciding on a fixed time when you will read the Bible every day without fail. You should begin with at least fifteen minutes or one chapter from the Bible every day.

2. **Find a place for your Bible reading.** Besides choosing a set time, you should choose a quiet place where you return each day for your Bible reading. This should be a place where no one is likely to disturb you.

3. **Choose the right Bible.** There are thousands of English translations (some would call them "distortions") of the Bible. Some are very literal translations that try to come as close as possible to the Greek and Hebrew original texts. These are sometimes difficult to read because the English is awkward. Other versions offer freer translations that take some liberties in translating the original. Still other versions are little more than highly subjective interpretations that bear little resemblance to the original Biblical texts. A good, literal translation to use as your main text is the Revised Standard Version (RSV - as found in The Oxford Annotated Bible). You may want to compare it, when necessary, with a more colloquial version such as the New International Version (NIV) or the "Good News" version. The Oxford Annotated Bible provides helpful notes and cross-references that illuminate the Bible texts.

4. **Don't start at the beginning.** The sequence of books in the Bible corresponds neither to the order they were written, nor to their significance. Many people valiantly begin reading the Bible from Gen. 1:1, but become frustrated by its occasionally obscure narratives and give up. Exodus is a better place to begin, as it presents much of the basic Old Testamental background necessary to understand the New Testament. Among the Gospels, choose the shorter Mark before tackling Matthew. The Epistles of John are worth much more than their sequence in the Bible might suggest to the novice. The Psalms need not necessarily be read like a book, but selected according to theme.

5. **Read systematically.** The Bible is made up of individual books. Each is a self-standing unit having its own setting, purpose and themes. You do a disservice to yourself and to the Bible, therefore, if you randomly choose passages from various books for your daily reading. Except perhaps for the Psalms, you should read the books of the Bible systematically from beginning to end. Choose a book of the Bible to read, and then begin reading sequentially each day until you finish the book. Then choose another.

6. **Read slowly.** You must not read the Bible the way you read the morning newspaper. The Bible contains levels and sub-levels of meaning, and it deserves to be read slowly, with the greatest care and thought.
7. **Stop and think.** Make notations. Many passages of the Bible are dense with meaning, containing subtle allusions to other portions of the Bible, as well as rich symbols and thought-provoking metaphors. A single sentence or phrases may deserve to be read a few times and reflected upon before you continue your reading.
8. **If you get stuck, keep going.** Contrary to the approach of religious pundits who inundate us with their stream-of-consciousness preaching, the Bible is a collection of sophisticated literary works of unequal complexity, style, purpose, authorship, language, etc. You cannot read the Psalms the same way you read Ephesians, just as you do not read the phone book the same way you read a legal brief. Scholars devote their entire careers to "understanding" the books of the Bible in all their theological, linguistic, literary and historical complexity. You should not think that every word of the Scripture will be crystal clear to you on a first reading. So do not despair when you encounter passages that seem obscure, irrelevant, or even silly. Read, reread, stop and think, then continue reading. The more you read the Bible, the more it will begin to explain itself. But you have to keep reading.
9. **Use Bible references.** While some people spend more time reading Bible commentaries than the Bible itself, it is useful to have a couple of extra-biblical references at hand as you read the Bible. A good Bible dictionary can be useful for cross-referencing people, places and symbols, as well as for brief historical background. The Oxford Bible Atlas contains maps which are indispensable for making sense of the innumerable topographical indications, especially in the Old Testament. As a general reference to the New Testament consult Raymond E. Brown, *Introduction to the New Testament* (Doubleday, 1997). For the Old Testament, Fr. Paul Tarazi's superb three-volume *Introduction to the Old Testament* (St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1991, 1994, 1996) is required reading. [Editor's Note: An outstanding book for people who want some help as they start reading the Bible is Margaret Nutting Ralph's *And God Said What?* (Paulist Press, 1986).] All of these are available from either amazon.com or bn.com.
10. **Read and Re-read.** You will never "finish" reading the Bible, not in this life. If, as the Church proclaims, the Bible is truly the Word of God, then we become nourished by the eternal, living, uncreated, life-giving Word every time we turn our eyes and brains to Him in sacred Scripture. Either Scripture is truly the Word of God, or it is not. As we read and re-read the books of the Bible, we grow in faith, and in the knowledge of God, and our comprehension of those same Scriptures grows.

A Prayer Before Reading the Bible

In your love for all people, Lord our God, flood our hearts with the spotless light of your divine wisdom and open the eyes of our mind that we may understand the message of your good news. Instill in us an awe for your blessed teachings, so that, overcoming all the cravings of our flesh, we may enter into a spiritual way of life, pleasing you in all our thoughts and actions. For you are the enlightenment of our souls and bodies, Christ our God, and we give glory to you, your eternal Father, and your all-holy, good, and life-giving Spirit, now and forever more. Amen.